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Religious interpretations of Tsunami in Satun province, Southern Thailand

Reflections on ethnographic and visual materials

Introduction

Satun is the southernmost province on the western coast of Thailand, bordering on Malaysia. Locally, Thai is the main language but about 10 % of the population of the province also speaks Malay. 70 % are Muslim (NSO 2001). Compared to the other southern Thai provinces, Phuket, Krabi and Phangnga, Satun province only suffered slight damage from the tsunami of 26 December 2004. The Tung Wa district in the north of Satun province reported six casualties, although some coastal villages were damaged and fishing boats wrecked.

I was carrying out anthropological fieldwork on reproductive health and birth practices in Satun when the tsunami struck.¹ On 29–30 December I visited the injured, mainly from Khao Lak (in Phangnga province), who were being treated at Songkhla Nakarin Hospital in Hat Yai. There were women, men, and children from Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands. In Satun itself, many acquaintances expressed their sympathy for "my" fellow countrymen² and the other tourists who had died. Later, people from several coastal locations talked to me about the effects the tsunami had had on their own lives. Several of my informants in Tung Wa had lost their property and their means of livelihood. The religious overtones of some of the videos which soon appeared on the market added not only a new dimension to what already was the all-pervading subject of conversation but also had a marked influence on people's perception of the event itself and of their own future. At the same time, if I brought up the subject, people often reacted by repressing their memories of those days, telling me that Thai people prefer to forget such horrible events quickly. For all these reasons, I decided to divert some of my research

plans to the investigation of people's responses to the tsunami. I will focus on the interpretations made by the Muslim people in Satun as to the cause of this natural catastrophe. There were two main themes in these interpretations: natural forces and religion.

This article is based on interviews and video-filmed material. I conducted interviews with Muslim informants from several coastal and inland locations in Thai or Malay. The event was often explained in religious terms with references to the end of the world. A few days after the tsunami, videos on CD began to appear in the local markets offering terrifying excerpts of the catastrophe. Two of the five films I examined were produced by a Muslim religious teacher in Satun; they arrived on the market with an air of authority and provided a religious explanation, which was enhanced and enriched by passages from the Qur'an and interviews with pious men. My two sources, the interviews and these films, reveal a commonality of interpretations, which was mutually reinforced. Even if it was too soon to assess the impact of the films on a wider public when I conducted my interviews, it was made clear in the interview I held with the author of the religious films that they had had an immediate effect on the young students of a local religious school, leading them to a deeper commitment to reading the Qur'an.

Although I limited my research to Muslim interpretations of the tsunami, a few words on the Buddhist perspective may be in order, given that the majority of Thailand's population is Buddhist. The national media presented Buddhist explanations of the event and ignored Muslim interpretations despite the fact that Muslims form the majority of the population in the area worst affected by the tsunami. Buddhist rituals and prayers were performed in Phuket and other places to appease and give peace to the spirits of the deceased. Stories abounded of ghosts haunting tourists and locals alike. Authoritative religious figures were interviewed and Buddhist monks were organized to offer counsel to the survivors. Curiously, both Buddhists and Muslims addressed the disrupted relations between humans and Nature as one explanation for the catastrophe.

About one month after the tsunami, an article appeared in the *Bangkok Post* reporting a speech which the Vietnamese Zen meditation master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh had given just a few days after the calamity. In this speech, he compares the Christian and Buddhist views on these

sorts of disasters. For Buddhism it is a matter of "Cause and Effect", the law of karma, which would possibly explain why even innocent children could perish.

Some people say that although during this lifetime they had not committed crimes they may have done so in a past life. We try to provide answers like this /.../ All the questions of cause and result, retribution and rebirth have to be resolved in light of the teachings of no-self. We have studied karma according to the Manifestation-Only teachings of Buddhist psychology, and we have seen that there is both individual and collective karma.³

Since the master was originally addressing a French audience, the reference to the tragic fate of Victor Hugo's daughter, who drowned at the age of twenty, links the event to the idea of recurrent individual and personal experience throughout history, turning it into a universal feature. The master says that Hugo also "found that human destiny is a collective destiny", the tsunami did not only strike the victims but all of us as well.

Although we are sitting here, and we have the impression that we are alive, in fact we have also died /.../ The human species and the planet Earth are one body. I have the feeling that our planet Earth is suffering, and this tsunami is the cry of the earth as it writhes in pain: a lament, a cry for help, a warning. We have lived together so long without love and compassion for each other. We destroy each other; we abuse our mother Earth. So the Earth has turned back on us, has groaned, has suffered /.../ These earthquakes are bells of mindfulness. The pain of one part of humankind is the pain of the whole of humankind. We have to see that and wake up.⁴

He then refers to the former belief that Asian rulers were deemed responsible when natural tragedies like these took place. The border-line between personal responsibility and collective fate is erased. Everyone on Earth contributes to the result of a collective karma. In this talk by Thich Nhat Hanh we are all perpetrators and all victims at the same time.

Similar points were made by Thai Buddhist monks and nuns. Monica Lindberg Falk quotes a nun who refers not only to an individual and a collective karma, but also to an indivisibility between humans and Earth, which are one body.⁵ Several monks have interpreted the disaster as a sign from Nature that we must change our lifestyle. Our planet is suffering and the tsunami was a cry of warning. Too many people lack compassion

for others and the disaster may be seen as the Earth's wake-up call to change the direction of our lives.⁶

The Muslims in Satun tended to see the tsunami either as the result of Nature's wrath or God's wrath, always keeping in mind that Nature has no will of its own but is ultimately subjected to the will of God. In both cases we are confronted with the recurrent idea of the tsunami as being a punishment for "sin", either ecological, moral or religious. Humanity has gone beyond the acceptable limits and a superior force has struck back. The idea of the ultimate human responsibility for the events is offered by both Buddhists and Muslims, either through the concept of individual/collective karma or as a direct punishment for past and present behaviour.

The impact of tsunami on the local economy

Since fish and seafood are the Muslim population's main sources of animal protein and fishing represents its most important economic activity, this perceived vengeance of Nature or God undermined the basic conditions for survival in the area. The impact of the tsunami was seen immediately in the local daily fresh fish market. The fish and seafood industry collapsed. Despite a fall in prices, customers turned to other products. Small catch was still popular but bigger fish were left unsold on the stalls. I could not help but follow the trend and stopped eating fish. As my female friend Nong⁷ told me in Malay, "People used to eat fish, but now fish eat people".⁸ It was a reversal of both the natural and cultural orders. Potentially, eating fish became an act of indirect anthropophagi. After a few weeks I decided to buy squids, but some of my friends dissuaded me from eating them since stories were told of corpses retrieved from the sea with squids tenaciously attached to them, their beaks deeply rooted in the human flesh, especially the ears. I didn't eat the squids.

The repulsion for fish was not only felt by my informants and I. An article appeared in the *Bangkok Post* on 8 February carrying the heading "Fancy fish?" The Department of Fisheries and the Public Health Ministry were particularly concerned about the possible outcome of this aversion to fish and tried to counter it. A campaign was designed as the first of a series, "Eating Fish and Seafood" to persuade people that the grue-

some pictures of rotten bodies broadcasted should not be connected to fish. In the words of a spokesman from Department of Fisheries:

Let me confirm that fish won't eat rotten meat. They eat plankton. Besides, corpses were found on the shore, not in the sea. We have tried to clarify this with the public. As well, the Public Health Ministry has continuously done random testing and found that fish is free of disease and safe to eat.⁹

The food crisis was aggravated by the recurrent alarming news of several outbreaks of bird flu in different locations in Thailand. I experienced January and February not only as the aftermath of a natural catastrophe but as a sort of general nutritional apocalypse as well.

One month after the tsunami, the local fish markets in Satun province were still affected; only produce from fish farms sold well, and prices were high. Shrimps and prawns from fish farms were also thought to be safe. The market returned to normal after the first week in February.

This general attitude to fish was not only a nutritional problem but affected the livelihood of all those whose primary occupation and income was related to fishing. In a house in Tung Wa district I interviewed the members of a large family, many of whom are fishermen. For the mother Hodya and her two daughters fishing had become something fearful to be done in a hurry. But, being the only source of income for the daughters' households it could not be given up. Women carefully chose the fish that was to be eaten. Small catch was considered safe, because it was caught close to the shore, but squids were still abhorred. My interview with Prani shows the economic impact of this situation for the fishers:

There is a lot of fish now in the sea. When I go fishing I make a big catch but because I cannot sell it I dry it with salt and send it to Tung Wa. There are no customers for fish. After the giant wave came it took fish from another sea here, but you cannot sell it or eat it. It is not like in the past when it was difficult to find enough fish, now there is plenty. Before the giant wave I could earn 200–300 Baht¹⁰ per day, now I catch fish worth 1 000 or more but cannot sell it. It would be good to sell now ... but I cannot. That is not good because in my heart I only think about the giant wave coming and I am scared. When I go to sea I work fast, do my fishing and come back home quickly. I don't want to stay on the beach too long.¹¹

In these statements it is possible to see the sea perceived both as a taker of human life and, at the same time, as a provider of enriched marine life. This bounty did not, however, result in increased profits, as it would have done before the tsunami. Prani's sister, Mariah also felt that the sea itself appeared different after the tsunami; the waves were two meters high and were felt to be threatening.¹²

Prani's husband, Mohammad, is also a fisherman. Since the tsunami, he has not been able to take his boat out. When he comes to the beach to start work and sees the water his body becomes cold and he starts trembling. His wife's mother asked me if I knew of any job for him in Satun town, "he would adapt to any job, he is a hard-working man but he is not able to fish anymore".¹³

Those fishermen, who had lost their boats and equipment, could apply for compensation for the disaster in order to make a restart. The procedure was to make a request to the head of the village (*kamnan*) who would then turn to the district to ask for money.¹⁴ The amount received could vary depending on the kind of boat the fisherman had owned. Students from technical schools in Satun and Langu volunteered their help and skills to repair the tools and clean the area.

The tsunami affected people's lives even in further ways. In the whole area around the coastal village Had Rawai in the Tung Wa district, 27 wells were polluted by sea water. People received a ration of water (1 500 liters per day per household) for basic needs but could also collect drinkable water in safe places such as the Public Health Office.¹⁵ Only one house in Had Rawai had been demolished but many had been inundated by mud and water. Boats and farm tools were destroyed or badly damaged. Public Health officers intervened to disinfect the wells with chlorine three days after the tsunami. Before doing this, the wells had to be emptied. In the beginning of February the second intervention had been scheduled but not yet carried out.

Local interpretations of the tsunami

On the day of the tsunami there had been portents, some more real than others, which, although not all understood at first, conveyed the same sense of foreboding. An 84-year-old midwife, Tok Cik, whom I inter-



Weekly market in Khuan Don District, fish from farm.

PHOTO: Claudia Merli

viewed, told me that people had been surprised to see all the cats rushing out of the houses and climbing the palm trees far away from the beach, "they knew" was the comment.¹⁶ It was said that the Moken people on Surin Island, noticed changes in animal behavior and managed to flee in time. Not only had they seen deep-sea creatures near the reef but crabs and lobsters abandoning their holes. When they saw the sea retreating on the morning of the 26 December they fled. An article in the *Bangkok Post* told about Moken myths and stories of events resembling the tsunami, which had been handed down in what the journalist called their "animist culture".¹⁷ The article reported a list of natural warnings, which should be paid attention to.

After the tsunami it was as if the whole of Nature's upheavals were suddenly signs of some supernatural agency, perceivable to those with special sensitivity. After the tsunami the manifestations of natural elements, the sea and the wind in particular, were experienced as changed and highly threatening, like in an altered order of life. Ordinary sounds and views no longer seemed familiar. My Muslim informants were constantly aware of

signs of changes in the environment. The wind was considered to blow with even more frightening intensity. An old woman said that on the day of the earthquake and the tsunami and even for several days afterwards she could feel the trembling in her limbs, as if her body could register the earthquake like a seismograph. Other people told me of similar bodily sensations. A midwife told me that she felt a tremor while she was praying *asri* (the prayer between 15.40 and 18.00) later in the afternoon on the same day as the tsunami, "It was nearly six o'clock and I was praying again when Amin arrived home and said, 'Mak, Mak must go! The big wave is coming again' and I ran away."¹⁸ The same thing happened a few days later during what was later reported in the news as being series of earthquakes in Iran, apparently totally unrelated to the events in Indonesia.

In the village of Had Rawai I talked to Tok Cik who lives with her son Ard in a wooden house right on the beach. The tsunami had struck between 10 and 11 a.m. while the earthquake was felt around 8 a.m. Ard said that the tsunami had moved the house. It was now leaning inland, its poles bending. Ard had been in town that morning eating with his friends at a restaurant when someone had come and said that a big wave had taken away Tok Cik. He rushed back home and on arrival was told that Tok Hamsah, his mother's 89-year-old sister, had rescued Tok Cik. Tok Cik added her own version of the experience:

When the wave came I was watching the TV and the water entered the house. Before the second wave people came to take me away ... I had never seen anything like this before. I'm still scared at night sometimes, but if it should happen again I don't want to run away. I want to die in my house. Now I think only of Allah, and that everything which happens in the world comes from Him and then I feel better "La-i-la ha-il lal lah".¹⁹

At this, Ard intervened abruptly, "If the wave comes again Allah cannot help you, you must only run, not to repeat 'La-i-la ha-il lal lah'!"²⁰

I asked what other people thought when the wave came and Tok Cik answered, "People had no thought for anything but running away; they even left the doors of their houses open. After that they also thought of Allah."²¹

Among the locals there was a general belief that Allah had sent the tsunami to clean "dirty" places. At Tan Yon Lanai beach, people described the wave as being so high that it was impossible to see the islands on the

horizon. There is a small restaurant on piles on the beach, which has been built after the tsunami. The owner tells about his experiences:

The wave reached the street, it cleaned the rubbish from the beach, all the dirt was carried to the street and now the beach is beautiful, the water is crystal clear. I had the idea of building a small resort with bungalows here but now I think that it would encourage *zina* ['extra-marital intercourse']. And then it could be that Allah would want to destroy everything just as in Khao Lak and Phuket.²²

The fact that the tsunami, which was seen as God's punishment, struck hard at Khao Lak and Phuket, confirmed the general conviction that these places were "dirty", i.e. places where people committed sin. Sexual sin is usually related to mass tourist resorts such as Phuket, Krabi, and Phi Phi which Westerners are thought to visit for the purpose of satisfying their sexual lust, often with local providers of sexual services, many of whom are of a very young age. The owner of the restaurant was afraid that Tan Yon Lanai would be similarly punished if he provided facilities that encouraged sexual sins. People seemed to imply that the wave had cleaned the place in both a material and a moral sense, erasing or removing both sinners and rubbish. Tan Yon Lanai is not an international tourist resort, but the locals certainly appreciate the beautiful scenery. The normal tourist facilities such as table, chairs, public toilets and showers are all provided on Rawai Beach. The problem for the locals is how to take full economic advantage of this natural beauty by expanding local tourism without letting the situation get out of hand and encouraging licentiousness.

Ali, a plantation owner from the Tung Maprang area, was one of those who were convinced that the catastrophe was the result of people's misconduct, "Allah wants to do something to clean these areas, in Islam it is called *balaq*,²³ and even the good die. But dirty areas were hit, like Aceh."²⁴

In this context, lack of cleanliness can refer both to the pollution of the beaches and to the filth of illicit sexuality. In this specific instance Ali is probably referring to the lack of religious conviction among the people of Aceh. Ali's mother added that people of all faiths were struck, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. What did this mean? Again referring to the events in Aceh which had become quickly renowned, Ali explained, "Now people must think more of God. It was a sheer miracle that although everything else in Aceh was destroyed both the *masjid* [the mosque] and the *kubon* [Muslim cemetery] were untouched."²⁵



Tok Hamsah (left) and Tok Cik (right), Had Rawai.

PHOTO: Claudia Merli

An old religious man gave a similar interpretation of the tsunami in Aceh. He thought that the Muslims in Aceh were not following Allah properly, "Many Hindus died in Aceh as well. Indonesia /.../ like in Phuket, in Krabi, dirty places. I think it was a trial, Allah wanted to show His power, and this was just a small thing. Now people are scared."²⁶ This idea of the particularly corrupt state of Muslim morals in Aceh resounded in Indonesia itself. In the aftermath of the tsunami in Indonesia there were alarmed warnings about the risk of child prostitution and trafficking,²⁷ as if amid its devastation the tsunami had even opened the way to corrupted behaviors, related in this case to the closing down of local schools.

The religious teacher, whose films I will analyze below associated the destruction of Aceh with the encroachment on nature caused by the oil exploitation in the area,²⁸ suggesting dirtiness connected to the oil indus-

try. Thus, the natural and religious interpretations of the tsunami were not mutually exclusive, but were often entertained simultaneously.

Other signs were looked for to confirm this view that the tsunami was a warning from God against sins and the straying of people from the right path. Colour posters with the picture of two surviving mosques in the midst of the destruction in Aceh literally flowed onto the local markets and were also sold privately by Muslims, sometimes with a missionary overtone. Although from two different locations in Aceh, Meulaboh and Kuede Teunon, the pictures of these two mosques were juxtaposed on the posters. The pictures were taken one week after the tsunami. The Indonesian headline on the poster says, "The greatness of God – Tens of mosques in Aceh territory stood firm against the tsunami calamity."²⁹

The picture of the mosque in Meulaboh is symbolic; it is the only building left standing on a muddy flat land where the only signs of the previously existing town are the faint traces of the foundations. The caption reads, "Only a mosque remains in Meulaboh, Aceh, while the other buildings were destroyed after being attacked by earthquake and tsunami a week ago."³⁰ On the other picture the text says, "The mosque in Kuede Teunon, 100 km south of Banda Aceh was not damaged although thousands of people died."³¹

It is obvious that the destruction in Aceh is used as a warning to the inflicted Muslim population to pay more attention to their religion. This interpretation is confirmed by the sentence found at the right corner of the poster, accompanied by the date 26 December 2004, "The Lord punished the half of us who forgot ourselves,³² greedy and arrogant, but the Lord protected His house (mosque)."³³

Various tales about miraculous escapes to the mosque also circulate in Tung Wa. Pak Mohd told a story about two Western tourists who were on holiday on Phi Phi Island. When the tsunami struck they started running, looking for a safe place. They went to the local mosque together with many other locals. While one of the men was running he saw in a vision the Baitullah, the building containing the Black Stone in Mecca. Safe in the mosque they escaped the tsunami and he who had had the vision soon converted to Islam, believing that his escape was a miracle.³⁴

A recurring theme in my interviews was the fear of a new tsunami coming soon and the forebodings my interviewees felt of new cataclysms.

The stories were invariably accompanied by exhortations to convert to Islam as the only way of saving my soul. I always felt that these people did it out of a genuine concern for me. Mak Hodya, for instance, once stressed that I should convert since a greater number of *farang*, i.e. Westerners than Thai had died in the tsunami.³⁵ During this conversation another person, an old shaman called Adam made a fearsome statement:

Pak Adam: Do you know? On 27th of this month [today] the tsunami will come again! Officer came home and said: "We must be careful on 27th or 28th."

Mak Hodya: This is news from TV?

Pak Adam: No, no it is from here.

Mak Hodya: This is not true!

Pak Adam: Pak doesn't know if this is true or not, if people are not saying the truth Pak is lying too [because he would just follow what he heard].

Mak Hodya: And today which day is it?

Pak Adam: Yes ... today is 27th, we must be careful today and tomorrow. If water arrives here we must swim, can you swim Claudia?

Pak Hadnan: [Addressing me] Do you have a life vest?³⁶

Not everyone saw the tsunami as a punishment meted out by God. The uncle and the niece of one of my informants, Yusuf, were the only victims from the village; their fishing-boat was smashed against one of the concrete piles of the bridge. Yusuf was rather skeptical of the idea of punishment, since his uncle was known to be a pious man. Instead, Yusuf believed that the tsunami was a purely natural catastrophe.³⁷ During my visit to a family in the neighborhood, people told me that Yusuf's uncle's body was found inside the boat but his daughter's was found on the beach on Monday morning. She was only wearing her slip and brassiere,³⁸ as if the tsunami had violated her body. Other fishermen from the village saved themselves by taking their boats beyond the wave toward the open sea.

Since the man who died on the boat was considered to be a pious religious person, people did not interpret his death as an act of punishment:

Yusuf: People say that Allah wanted to take him to Heaven earlier, together with his daughter. I like this explanation more.

Claudia: What do you think of these two contrasting explanations?

Yusuf: People can decide if they know the particular case that they can have another interpretation. For example my house wasn't damaged but I received some donations of rice and food anyhow, maybe it is my uncle who is making merit for us.³⁹

In the last sentence Yusuf used the term 'making merit' which, despite its Buddhist origins is widespread among the Muslims in the region. It implies that the good a person does in his lifetime will not only affect her/him personally but also her/his family and relatives. It is thus possible to make merit "for" someone else, intentionally or even unintentionally. Yusuf did not explain if he meant that his uncle was making merit for his relatives after death, or whether the merits resulted from his good conduct when alive. In any case, what emerges is that very contrasting religious explanations can be offered to make sense of the deaths of persons known to have been pious Muslims. The idea of a general punishment is more easily attached to a mass of unknown people, such as tourists.

Visual accounts and interpretations

Only a few days after the event, it was possible to purchase video material sold on VCDs⁴⁰ on the tsunami with very different contents. Some of the videos are collections of films made by tourists from the roofs of hotels and village resorts; in most cases there is a collage of several short amateur videos from different locations, mainly from Phuket. Many of these sequences from Phuket were later broadcasted by Thai television.

A variety of more planned productions of post-disaster material was soon available in the markets. These films fall into two categories, "documentaries" and films with a religious content. The documentaries are often footage without titles, comments, or authors listed, depicting rather gruesome scenes from the morgue in Phangnga and the like. Others are authored and superimposed with commentaries and soundtracks. The religious films are represented by two productions with interpretative religious reflections, both produced by the same person, a teacher of Arabic in a private Islamic school.

The films of the tsunami

I have three VCDs of the tsunami, but I will limit this analysis to two films with material from Thailand. The third film also includes material from Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. I acquired these VCDs from a friend on the last day in January. I will describe the contents of the VCDs.

Film #1: *Earth calamity: giant wave tumbles down into the South*. (Duration 0:28:45):

It includes films from several locations, in order of appearance: Phuket, from Krabi province Phi Phi and Ko Lanta, from Phangnga province Ko Surinat and Khao Lak. Scenes from Phuket are to be found in almost all other videos, but this film and film #3 also contain material from Khao Lak. In this first film there are directorial cuts of the material from Khao Lak. This is important since the two videos with religious interpretations are based on visits to Khao Lak a few days after the tsunami. Khao Lak was the place where the majority of Swedish tourists who were affected were spending their holidays. The film opens with a black and white picture of Phuket hit by the wave with a superimposed red script with the title of the VCD. The film then presents a preamble with pictures of the most beautiful locations in Phuket, while a narrating voice introduces the area and explains with the support of maps the dynamic of the earthquake off Sumatra which produced the tsunami. After several scenes from Phuket showing the waves the film continues with documentaries from other locations, almost giving a full range of the fury of water. During the film the images from Ao Nang are accompanied by music that heightens the sensation, the black onrush of the water accompanied by the full blare of the orchestra's brass section.

This part is followed by the song and video on the tsunami written by the famous Thai singer Ed Karapao, accompanied by subtitles in Thai with the text of the song. The song became immediately very popular and was used to accompany daily updates on tv. The title is *Wipe the tears Andaman*. The music video is a collage of scenes of rescuers at work and victims leaving their houses. The text describes the tsunami as the King of Death because of its sudden appearance and the devastation it caused. There are references to bad luck (which the Thai compound word seems to link to karma) and expressions carrying Buddhism oriented interpretations of the event, inviting Thai people in the Andaman area to wipe their tears and to continue to offer help and to support the victims, "let's flow streams of generosity".

Film #2: *Phuket struck with great danger by the giant wave Tsunami on 26 December 2547*. (Duration: 0:45:40):

This film contains material and still pictures of the most frequented streets of Phuket after the tsunami, with tourists portrayed wandering in distress among the debris and taking pictures. It is the one in which the destruction of tourist resorts and the places of entertainment is more visible. This film is made more professionally and is accompanied by long titles at the end of the film. There are aerial views of Phuket, to which the film is entirely dedicated. Also here we can see beautiful images of the tourist paradise. Then the images of a withdrawn sea with the boat stuck in the sand matches with a female voice singing about the strangeness of this phenomenon she has never seen before. It is Thai traditional music, with only the female voice almost reciting and then instruments, "No one told me before that one day the sea could go away". Then there are sequences of films from Phuket. After the scenes of the tsunami follows a series of pictures of Phuket's streets and tourist areas after the wave, completely covered in mud and litter. Telephone booths uprooted and cars piled on the top of each other, people queuing at the hospital. Again the female voice sings. A shock arrives at the end of the film when the titles are accompanied by rock'n'roll music, leaving the viewer with a total sense of dismay. The main film is followed by original film materials on Phuket and Khao Lak presented unedited, without cuts.

The post-tsunami films

The post-tsunami films differ somewhat from the tsunami films described above. I have three videos of this sort. One is quite a shocking document with no titles, no comment, without narrations, and non-authored. It is filmed immediately after the tsunami, very probably the same day or a few days after. There are very graphic scenes of bodies in the water, and long views of the morgue in the Wat Yanyao, the big Buddhist temple in Phangnga, which became the centre of the forensic efforts for the identifications of the bodies, all equally blackened and swollen. It is a mute terrible documentary of the torment of people waiting for and finding their beloved.

Film#3: *Situation since the Tsunami wave tumbled down*. (Duration 0:55:42):

This film starts from inside a car traveling toward Phangnga. There are no headings, no filming information, and the title is only printed on the disc's folder. From what becomes evident later on, the person filming is visiting the location together with a woman and a young boy, probably his wife and son. The filmmaker never intervenes with comments on the scenes, but there are interviews with locals. The document shows gruesome images of bodies being retrieved in different locations. Standing on a pier, a group of people waits for the authorities to collect bodies that are lying in the water, their feet and stiff limbs tied firmly to the pier with cable. They were probably dragged there from other locations or from the open sea. The bodies are rigid, buoyant as if made of wood. The flesh is bleached and faces blackened, all with the same horrendous expression. A man approaches the water and, sobbing, touches the body of a child repeating in Thai "son, son". He lifts the child out of the water and lays him down on the concrete and with tender gestures tries to arrange his shirt, his clothes. Then he goes back to the water and tries to approach another body lying face-down in the water, its head wrapped in a red cloth. Judging by the dress and shape it is a woman. There are naval officers and policemen standing around. Even if this man had found his loved ones he could not take them out of the water without permission from the authorities.

In the film there are also scenes of bodies unearthed, removed from the rubble and debris. But most horrifying are the scenes from the morgue at Yanyao temple, where the enormous task of identifying the dead was organized. We can see hundreds of bodies lying on the floor in the ceremony halls. The first impression to strike one is that all the faces are virtually identical, irrespective of age, sex and ethnic background. A Western woman is distinguishable only by virtue of her blond hair and bathing suit. The filmmaker seems to linger on these horrific details.

People in Satun could see this kind of images in the local tv news and other printed materials as well and they often talked about the fact that all victims looked the same, with face features often compared to those of frogs. This was interpreted again as a sign of superhuman intervention dehumanizing the victims. A few still pictures similar to these are shown in the second version of the video with religious explanations, which I am going to describe next.

Film #4: *Enormous wave: Natural catastrophe or warning of Qiyamah Day*. (Duration 1:34:25):

The title of this production itself gives an idea of its religious content. In Islam, Qiyamah Day (sometimes also spelled Qiyamat) is the Day of Doom, the Day of Judgment, sometimes also translated as Resurrection. *Sura* 75 of the Qur'an carries the title Al-Qiyamah but the event is also referred to in other verses. The two post-tsunami films were produced by a teacher in a private Islamic school. They are essentially two versions of the same product. The format and duration is similar in both but their visual results are quite different. The label on this VCD (Film #4) has the wrong date – 25th December 2547,⁴¹ antedating the tsunami at Christmas. This mistake or typing error is corrected in the second version (film #5). It opens with the title and the names of the organization producing the VCD, The Centre for Arabic Language, and its director. The introduction is accompanied by recitations of religious texts in Arabic and the picture of an open book, the Qur'an. The film then moves on to scenes of the wreck of a hotel in Khao Lak. Verses from Al-Hajj 22:2 (in Thai) are superimposed on these in red characters while a male voice recites the same verses in Arabic:⁴²

The Day ye shall see it,
Every mother giving suck
Shall forget her suckling-babe,
And every pregnant female
Shall drop her load (unformed):
Thou shalt see mankind
As in a drunken riot,
Yet not drunk: but dreadful
Will be the Chastisement of Allah.

The video continues with still pictures, more similar to drawings, and other verses from different *sura* of the Qur'an, all referring to descriptions of the environmental cataclysms which will presage the end of the world. They recur at different moments during the film. I simply list them here one after the other.

Al-Zalzalah 99: 1–2⁴³

When the Earth is / Shaken to her (utmost) convulsion,
And the Earth throws up / Her burdens (from within).

Al-Takwir 81: 1-3, 6⁴⁴

When the sun (With its spacious light) / Is folded up;
When the stars / Fall, losing their luster;
When the mountains vanish / (Like a mirage);
When the oceans / Boil over with a swell ...

Al-Infitar 82: 1-3⁴⁵

When the Sky / Is cleft asunder;
When the Stars / Are scattered;
When the Oceans / Are suffered to burst forth ...

The video presents the situation in Khao Lak two days after the tsunami. It shows the stains where the water reached the second floor of the buildings. The filmmaker stops at scattered luggage. The film team focuses on a group of men on the beach. They are dressed in long white robes and wear the typical white hat or turban that Muslims use. They interview one of these men and he explains that what happened was already written in the Qur'an and that it is a warning from God. While this man is talking, the camera turns toward the sea to film a helicopter.

This section is followed by shots from several inland locations, with fish lying in the tall grass, cars standing on end against trees, and the police boat, which was once moored in the bay, lying in the forest. The team interviews several people on their personal experience and then visits a mosque, which remained unscathed.

This video concentrates both on local interpretations as witnessed through the voices of people living in the most devastated area and from the *sura* where there is a description of events similar to this. The film starts with the Qur'an verses and then goes to people. It is important to stress this fact as in the later version the order is changed as well as the relative importance given to each.

Film #5: *Earth catastrophe or an alarm call of Qiyamah day?* (Duration: 1:17:52):

I bought the second version of this VCD on 26 January at the weekly market in Khuan Don, from the same person who sold me the first version. The folder of the VCD is slightly different; the date of the tsunami has been removed. The film opens with the same presentation of the Centre for Arabic Language of Satun, but instead of starting with a passage

from the Qur'an accompanied by the pictures of the destruction in Khao Lak, it shows a long selection of films of the wave taken by tourists and amateurs and the speaker comments on the event. There are also clips from Indonesia, Banda Aceh. The teacher's voice stresses the importance of Qiyamah Day in the Qur'an and refers specifically to *sura* Al-Hajj (22) which, as in the first version of the VCD, is both in text (Thai translation) and recited. This time it is recited against a background of pictures from Phuket.

This is followed by a clip, which is a document from Khao Lak beach taken by a tourist whose camera starts shaking as the wave approaches. This document, taken from the beach, ends here. The editor has then inserted the well-known sequence on Khao Lak taken from the hill. The *sura* Al-Takwir 81: 1–3 and 81: 6 (see above) follow immediately after this, as in the first version, accompanied by colorful and simple pictures. When the films of the wave start again the teacher recites Al-Infitar, 82: 3. The verses are explained and commentated.

After this there is an animation of the mechanism and formation of *tsunami* in the ocean bed, with a wave that grows up to more than a hundred feet and submerges the skyscrapers of what seems to be a miniature of New York with two very tall towers. After scenes from various locations the VCD presents a satellite picture downloaded from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/eye/andaman-sri-lanka.htm>. It is a picture of the impact of the *tsunami* in Kalutara, Sri Lanka, south of the capital Colombo. According to an article released by France Press this picture has been interpreted by Sri Lankan Muslims as God's signature since the swirling waves were claimed to resemble the Arabic script for Allah. On the website it is possible to see a comparison of the picture and the script. In the VCD made in Satun the same sequence is presented, showing the run-up of the *tsunami* and the curious shape of the waves.

After this, the same post-tsunami material as in the first version is presented but edited. In the first version there were no pictures of corpses, but here we are presented with several. A blackened face swollen with an enormous tongue, like a ball, protruding between its lips. This is followed by the picture of a dead woman, whose face is astonishingly similar to the previous one. A third and a fourth, almost identical, follow. Then there are more pictures of corpses with number tags and the words *jing*,

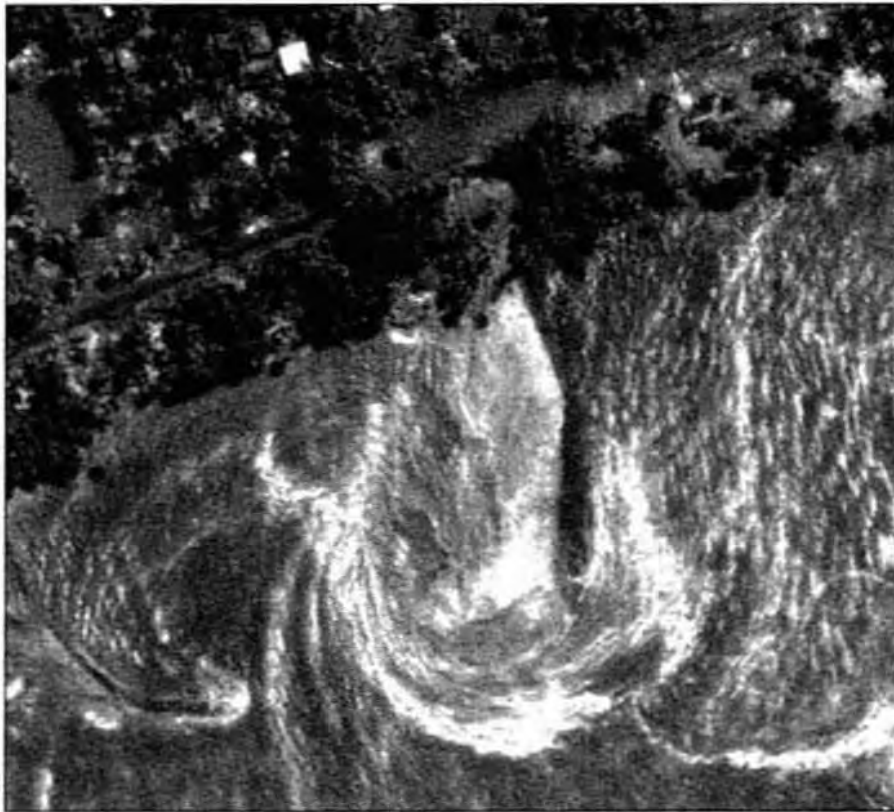
'woman' or *chai*, 'man'. The insertion of these images of corpses, which was absent in the first version, adds to the dramatic effect. The disfiguration of the human body and the astonishing similarity of all these corpses illustrating the inescapability of human fate. In this second version pictures of the waves are inserted and given precedence of the religious verses and the opinions of people. The author's commentaries underline and emphasize the message. His voice becomes more of a guide through the material than it was in the previous film.

Interview with a filmmaker

After the release of this second video with religious interpretations, I interviewed the filmmaker, Sulaiman (his name has been changed). He is a teacher of Arabic in a religious school. During the interview, Sulaiman explained why he had made the film in the first place and how it had become so well known. The material he had filmed directly in Khao Lak was recorded two days after the tsunami, on 28 December. Initially, the VCD was only meant to be shown to students in the religious private school where he teaches. Then, when the students who had seen the VCD talked with relatives and friends about it requests for copies started to come in. Only at this point did Sulaiman have the idea of commercialising it. The VCD was sold for 30 Baht to people from the local mosque and for 50 Baht to outsiders. When I bought it in the market the price was 100 Baht. Sulaiman donates his profit to the mosque close to the school. When I bought the first version the person selling the VCD claimed that the money would go to the people in Khao Lak, but Sulaiman never entertained this idea. "Initially, the VCD was only made to inform people about Islam, that this is the work of Allah. I didn't want to sell the VCD but, later, when I saw that people were interested, I felt that I had to sell it."⁴⁶

I asked him why he decided to modify the first version by adding material downloaded from websites and changing the structure of the film.

I made the second version because if there are verses from the Qur'an at the beginning people would lose interest. People are more interested in the wave itself, they want to know what it was like when the wave struck. I inserted the verses after that. After seeing the waves people become more interested in reading and remembering the Qur'an.⁴⁷



The wave in Kalutara, Sri Lanka.

Sulaiman stressed that since the Qur'an depicts similar kinds of events as signs of the Qiyamah Day, by viewing the catastrophe people might couple it to the detailed descriptions found in the *sura*. Thus, even if Muslims don't like what happened, they must be made aware that this was a sign from Allah. The VCD became very popular among the students of the religious school and they did in fact become more interested in reading the Qur'an. Sulaiman said that his teaching method aims at combining scientific knowledge and religion, as they meet in the Qur'an.

In the Qur'an Allah says that if people destroy nature, it will be difficult to survive in this world. This is already written in the Qur'an. When I am teaching about what happened in Phuket I explain, "Do you see? You cannot destroy nature" as in Aceh where people exploited the oil reserves and then there was a change, you must protect the environment.⁴⁸

One of the students in the religious school, where the interview occurred, is the son and the brother of the two victims of the wave in Tung Wa who I mentioned earlier. I asked Sulaiman how he felt about the widespread idea that the tsunami was a punishment meted out to "dirty places".

He didn't see any contradiction in this since in the Qur'an it is explained that when these events take place even good people will die, and that, anyway, it is impossible to know what a person is really like.

These people in Tung Wa cannot decide if someone is good or bad, because people cannot really know /.../ maybe one thinks that this or that person is good person but perhaps they are not. I always see a film about a beautiful woman and the actress is very famous, it is the same in our real life; in one situation one is a good person and in another situation one is a bad person.⁴⁹

That a person, as an actor, can be a protagonist with different roles in different events, at different stages in life, partly mirrors the Buddhist idea of the death of innocents being explained by their individual karma, inherited from previous lives which are unknown to us.

Conclusions: Films and their messages

At the end of our interview Sulaiman told me that he was planning to release a third version of the VCD linking Islam to the treatment of the environment:

Allah said that humans must respect nature, but instead they are destroying it and Nature in its turn can destroy humans. In the Qur'an it is written that Allah gave rules to humans but they didn't follow them and Allah decided that "as you don't obey this will come to you in return". Humans destroy the environment and then nature revolts against humans.⁵⁰

The VCD was not only circulating in this *madrasa*, religious school.⁵¹ A female teacher in a local kindergarten attended by Muslim children between three and six years of age, told me that she was showing the first version to her pupils, accompanying it with comments on the way Allah decided to clean up those places where the *farangs* lay naked on the beach. At this, I asked her why other places like Aceh, India, etc. were also hit. She answered that there were naked Westerners in these places too.⁵² The material was used for very different purposes than those wished for and declared by the filmmaker. Once the video material was on the market it was open to individual interpretations and inclinations. In this case with a view to impressing proper behavior and Islamic dress code on very small children, which, for the female pupils already in the kindergarten implies wearing

a headscarf. The VCD was used to instill a fear of the possible punishments for any future failure to adhere to the approved codes of morality.

In the wake of the popular demand for tsunami videos other disaster productions also found a wider audience. The American movie *The Day After Tomorrow* by Roland Emmerich (released in 2004) was prominently displayed on a special stand at the entrance to the largest video shop in Satun, where it presumably sold very well. The film is about a meteorological disaster caused by global warming, which wreaks havoc over most of the northern hemisphere. A tidal wave hits America's east coast and is followed by sudden glaciation leading to a massive exodus of North Americans across the border into Mexico. A reversal of the normal direction of migration. The catastrophe is depicted as a consequence of man's senseless exploitation of natural resources. As we have seen, this is a theme that echoes both Thai Muslim and Buddhist conceptions of the tsunami. The sudden popularity of *The Day After Tomorrow* in post-tsunami Satun may be seen as an instance of the simultaneity of several different dimensions of the globalization process.

The impact of the media and information technologies in the aftermath of the tsunami was huge, not only in the West, but also in the places directly affected. The circulation on the web of scenes and clips filmed by private individuals who were in the areas made it possible for others to access and assemble the material in new forms. Though the original footage is essentially the same, the layout and commentaries (when present) radically affect the impact of the final product.

These products found an immediate market in the whole region. There was apparently a huge market for them in Indonesia. Scenes of the terrifying waves and the destruction they wrought drove home the message that this was a revenge on humans, a punishment either by Nature (for not having respected it) or by God (for behaving against His law). The facts were pointed out as forewarnings of worse catastrophes to come because they were never experienced or seen before and could indicate the beginning of an apocalyptic era. Muslims related the tsunami to passages in the Qur'an describing the arrival of the Day of Resurrection by natural calamities. In one case, the author of two VCDs, particularly stressing this link with the sacred book, explained the events as having both natural and divine causes and demonstrated that the Qur'an already con-

tains warnings of the consequences of not respecting nature and protecting the environment. Other religious interpretations existed as well. Buddhist monks performed rituals and prayers for the victims and the law of collective karma was offered as a possible explanation to the distressing loss of so many human lives.

The events influenced the lives of Muslim fishermen in the region to different degrees, linking the threatening power of nature and God to their means of livelihood. The familiar natural environment became unpredictable and threatening. The tsunami was perceived by many as a punishment for wrongdoing, sinful behavior referring particularly to the tourist resorts in Thailand where so many Europeans lost their lives. In these tourist paradises was to be found the sinful way of life so much at variance to the way indicated by Islam. In either case wrongful human behavior against nature or against God, was the ultimate cause of the disaster. According to the Buddhist position the punishment was meted out for actions performed in a previous life or in a more extended collective past. In both Muslim and Buddhist interpretations the feeling arises of a punishment resulting from human misconduct.

Acknowledgments

Jan Ovesen has read and commented on successive drafts of this article. Both Ing-Britt Trankell and Peter Schalk kindly guided me in the use of Thai Buddhist concepts and terms. Wolfram Schaffar and Klemens Karlsson gave valuable suggestions of transcriptions of Thai lines. The anonymous reader and Marja-Liisa Keinänen both provided very useful comments and advice. My assistant Anyavalee Srichanapai has not only been an invaluable help in translating and assisting during interviews and film screening but also a precious friend throughout the distress of the post tsunami situation. However, needless to say the responsibility for the ideas presented and possible shortcomings is exclusively my own.

Notes

- 1 This research on reproductive health will be the subject of my PhD thesis and has been carried out with grants received from Svenska Sällskapet för Antropologi och Geografi (Sweden) and Donnerska Institutet – Åbo Akademi (Finland).
- 2 Though living and working in Sweden I am an Italian citizen. But for the local people I was a sort of honorary Swede. The reason why the locals showed special concern for the fate of Swedish citizens was due to the fact that an enormous number of Swedes were reported missing (which the news reported as constantly increasing). They also seemed to be specially concerned and worried for my feelings and for my country of residence. People of my Thai "adoptive family" in Satun were in Phuket at the time, and I was greatly relieved to be able to contact them by mobile phone and discover that they were safe.
- 3 Thich Nhat Hanh 2005.
- 4 Thich Nhat Hanh 2005.
- 5 Lindberg Falk 2005: 23, 24.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 All the names of informants in this article are pseudonyms.
- 8 "Dahulu orang makan ikan, kini ikan makan orang."
- 9 Valarak Chaiyatatap 2005.
- 10 In 2004 the exchange rate of a Swedish crown was 5 Baht.
- 11 17/01/2005. All the interviews were conducted either in Thai or Malay. Here I offer the translation in English elaborated together with my assistant from the recording.
- 12 Mariah 17/01/2005.
- 13 Hodya 17/01/2005.
- 14 There is not a uniform system for the transcription of Thai into the Roman alphabet. For this article I have followed the general guidelines given by Mary Haas (1964), with modifications concerning the rendering of the open vowels marked as "O" and "E", and the closed "o" and "e". All diacritical signs have been dropped.
- 15 This was one of the greatest hazards, which were at the core of the interventions organized by the World Health Organization along with the supply of New Emergency Health Kits (NEHK). One NEHK cover the health needs of 10 000 people for three months. The strategy for health assistance for the first 100 days cost 37 million USD (see WHO Reports 27/12/2004, 29/12/2004 and 31/12/2004).
- 16 Tok Cik 08/02/2005.
- 17 Karnjariya Sukrung 2005.
- 18 Hodya 17/01/2005.
- 19 Tok Cik 08/02/2005. "La-i-la ha-il lal lah Muhammaddan rasullul lah" is the Muslim profession of faith: "There is no God but one and Muhammad is His messenger."
- 20 08/02/2005.
- 21 Tok Cik 08/02/2005.
- 22 TYL 24/01/2005.
- 23 *Balaq* is translated with 'to annihilate', 'to make waste of'.
- 24 Ali 07/01/2005.
- 25 Ali 07/01/2005.
- 26 Tok Imam 05/02/2005.
- 27 Möller 2005: 16.

- 28 Sulaiman 14/02/2005.
- 29 "Kebesaran Ilahi – Puluhan masjid di wilayah Aceh tetap teguh di sebalik bencana tsunami."
- 30 "Hanya sebuah masjid masih ada di Meulaboh, Aceh manakala bangunan-bangunan lain musnah selepas dilanda gempa bumi dan tsunami minggu lepas."
- 31 "Masjid yang terletak di Kuede Teunon, 100 kilometer di selatan Banda Aceh juga tidak rosak walaupun ribuan penduduknya maut."
- 32 The expression 'kita yang lupa diri' (see note below) has been translated here as '[those of] us that forgot ourselves', however 'diri' can also be the infinitive form of the verb 'to stand'.
- 33 "Tuhan menghukum sesetengah daripada kita yang lupa diri, tamak dan angkuh, tetapi Tuhan melindungi rumah-Nya (masjid)." This sentence contains an implicit reference to a famous episode reported in Qur'an *Sura* 105 (*Al-Fil*, The Elephant) in which Abraha, the viceroy of Yemen went to destroy Kabah, the cubic building in the centre of the Masjid al Haram in Mecca. It is the supreme symbol of the unity among Muslims and as such it is the destination of pilgrimage for millions of believers. According to the legend, the grandfather of the Prophet Mohammad went to the encampment of Abraha to complain about the theft of some camels. Abraha is said to have retorted that they would be better to worry about the Kabah which he was preparing to destroy, but the old man answered that God would protect His own house. The army was defeated by the supernatural intervention of birds throwing stones. No one in Satun made any direct comparison between this *sura* and the amazing pictures from Indonesia, but the message of God's protecting His own abode amid total annihilation is not new. These surviving buildings were presented as evidence of the righteousness of Islamic faith by my informants, and as a clear message to people of other faiths such as I to consider converting to Islam.
- 34 Pak Mohd 27/01/2005.
- 35 Hodya 27/01/2005.
- 36 27/01/2005.
- 37 Yusuf 08/02/2005.
- 38 Hodya 17/01/2005.
- 39 Yusuf 08/02/2005.
- 40 VCD is an abbreviation for Video Compact Disc, and it is a digital video storage. Similar to DVD (originally for Digital Video Disc) but offering a poorer image quality, uses the compression standard MPEG. In Asia it is the most common way to commercialize films, as it is less expensive both to produce and acquire VCDs than DVDs and VCD players are cheaper. It can be viewed on most personal computers with the proper decoder system.
- 41 This is the date following the Buddhist Era, which is 543 ahead of our calendar.
- 42 The translation I present in text is the version offered by the Qur'an in Arabic and English funded by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, a precious edition, which was given to me by people in the most prestigious religious school in Satun as the orthodox translation into English. Here, in the notes I offer another contemporary translation by Ahmed Ali, published by Princeton University, praised for its poetic value: The day you see it / every suckling mother will forget her suckling, / and every pregnant female will discharge her burden. / You will see men drunk, / yet it will not be intoxication. / The torment of God will be severe.

- 43 1. When the world is shaken up by its cataclysm, / 2. And the earth throws out its burdens.
- 44 1. When the sun is folded up, / 2. The stars turn dim and scatter, / 3. The mountains made to move, / 6. When the oceans surge and swell.
- 45 1. When the sky is split asunder, / 2. And the stars dispersed, / 3. When the oceans begin to flow.
- 46 Sulaiman 14/02/2005.
- 47 Sulaiman 14/02/2005.
- 48 Sulaiman 14/02/2005.
- 49 Sulaiman 14/02/2005.
- 50 Sulaiman 14/02/2005.
- 51 A *madrasa* is a kind of school providing religious education along with instruction in secular subjects. Nowadays, it is the most common institution attended by Muslim children and teenagers in Southern Thailand. This form has progressively but not entirely replaced the other and older kind of local religious school, called *pondok*, which provides exclusively religious education. *Pondok* still exist throughout Southern Thailand.
- 52 Female teacher 07/01/2005.

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Video materials

- #1) *ThOOranii phibat khlyyn jak thalom tai* [Earth calamity: giant wave tumbles down into the South]. (Several locations including Khao Lak [edited] and final Thai song with subtitles).
- #2) *Phuket doon mahantaphai khlyyn jak tsunami wan thii 26 thanwaakhom 2547* [Phuket struck by catastrophic giant wave Tsunami on 26 December 2547]. (Containing material on Phuket and unedited material on Khao Lak).
- #3) *Hetkaan caak khlyyn tsunami thalom* [Situation since the Tsunami wave tumbled down]. (Document on retrieving bodies and morgue).
- #4) *Khlyyn jak mahantaphai thammachaat ryy waa sanjaan hEEng wan Qiyamah* [Enormous wave as natural disaster or warning of Qiyamah Day?] (First version produced by Sulaiman).
- #5) *ThOOranii wibat ryy waa sanjaan hEEng Qiyamah* [Earth catastrophe or a warning signal of Qiyamat day?] (Second version produced by Sulaiman).

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Verses from Qur'an

Al-Hajj 22:2

Al-Zalzalah 99: 1-2

Al-Takwir 81: 1-3, 6

Al-Infitar 82: 1

Interviews in chronological order

Interview Ali#1 07/01/2005

Interview female teacher#1 07/01/2005

Interview Hodya#2 17/01/2005

Interview Mariah#1 17/01/2005

Interview Aloy#1 18/01/2005

Interview Hodya#3 24/01/2005

Interview TYL#1 24/01/2004

Interview Mohd 27/01/2005

Interview Imam#2 05/02/2005

Interview Cik#1 08/02/2004

Interview Hamsah#1 08/02/2005

Interview Yusuf#1 08/02/2004

Interview Sulaiman#1 14/02/2005

Interview Yusuf#2 15/02/2005

Interview Hodya#6 24/02/2004

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